1994-09-20
Wall Street Journal

Some Skeptics Become Believers After They Spend A Week Learning How to Get Out of Their Bodies

Research Institute Shows People a Way Out of Their Bodies

* * *

Students of Robert Monroe Let Their Minds Wander Across Time and Space

By Bob Ortega
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

FABER, Va. – Here in the misty foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, people come to the Monroe Institute to get away from it all – particularly their bodies.

On a recent summer evening, staff member David Mulvey welcomes 25 visitors with a caveat: No one who takes the institute's weeklong Gateway course is guaranteed an OBE, as an out-of-body experience is called.

Anything less, though, would greatly disappoint many who visit the institute, a research outfit devoted to the study and teaching of altered states of consciousness. Guests in this group have journeyed from as far as Switzerland, and most paid the course's $1,300 fee just so they could learn to depart from their bodies.

For them, Mr. Mulvey offers a few helpful hints. "There must be 50 ways to leave your body," he says. One's consciousness, for instance, can float out the top of the head, or roll like a log out of the body, or spring from it like a pole vaulter.

Trips in Deep Sleep

And sometimes, people slip out of their bodies without even trying. "We believe everybody goes out-of-body every night in delta sleep," the deepest stage of sleep, says Mr. Mulvey. "They just aren't consciously aware of it."

At the institute, such unconscious departures hardly count. The goal is to take out-of-body trips when and where one wants, and remember them afterward, in the tradition of institute founder Robert Monroe. Among the thousands of OBEs he reports having taken are expeditions to the former Soviet Union, trips to visit his daughter at college, voyages to the distant past and treks to other planets. Once, he says, he met an alien who looked and sounded like W.C. Fields.

Mr. Monroe seeks to modify human brain-wave activity not only for out-of-body trips, but for other goals such as sharpening memory and controlling pain during surgery. For 21 years, his private, nonprofit institute has been teaching such exercises through various courses, including the standard Gateway program.

Robert Monroe

One Gateway alumnus and fan is Kai Sui Fung, the 91-year-old head of a Zen Buddhist temple in Vancouver, British Columbia. He believes that Gateway students can reach meditation states in a week that took him years of sitting. His temple now uses audiotapes from the Monroe Institute as a training tool.

Many among the institute's 7,000 graduates hail from the halls of business and industry – even the military. Retired Gen. Albert Stubblebine, former director of the U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command, confirms that the Army sent personnel to the institute in the 1980s. At that time, the Army was investigating the potential military applications of psychic phenomenon and "new-age" training techniques.

Also during the 1980s, DuPont Co. sent nearly a dozen managers to the institute, hoping to inspire creativity, says Herman Maynard, a retired marketing manager at the company. It phased out the visits to the institute after his retirement. Another manager says DuPont wasn't thrilled by spurious company gossip about an employee who, having attended a Monroe session and "discovered that he was a goat in a past life," began to revert.

A DuPont spokeswoman says corporate "downsizing" was behind the phasing out of the visits to the institute.

The bestselling co-author of "Beyond IBM," Katie McKeown, visited the institute a few years ago after the unexpected death of Louis Mobley, her friend and collaborator on the book. Suddenly, she recalls, Mr. Mobley communicated with her through James R. Hoover, a DuPont manager – and skeptic – attending the institute at company expense.

Mr. Hoover, who had never met Mr. Mobley, confirms that he spoke with the dead man while in an altered state of consciousness. He had remained skeptical until he related the conversation to Ms. McKeown, who said that certain remarks could only have come from Mr. Mobley. That "scared the daylights out of me," says Mr. Hoover. "I still get chills thinking about it."

Others find the idea of out-of-body trips more amusing than scary. Sen. Claiborne Pell once showed up saying that he had two hours' free time and asked for an OBE to be arranged on the spot. As Mr. Monroe recalls, he said sure, and asked an aide to bring him a hammer.

Asked about the encounter, the Rhode Island Democrat laughs. He says he plans to complete the weeklong course after he retires, "though I'm a little timorous about really having" an OBE, "because I wonder if I'll be able to get back into my body."

The founder of the institute says he had his first OBE one lazy afternoon in 1958. While lolling on a couch at home, he felt an odd vibration, and found himself floating toward the ceiling. There, he looked down with horror at his own inert form.

As soon as he snapped back in, he rushed off to his doctor, who could offer no explanation. After that, he says, it kept happening. "It took a full year for me to believe and then to know this was not a hallucination," says Mr. Monroe, who all along regarded himself as a sober businessman with no spiritual inclinations.

After scores of experiences, some terrifying, in which he says he floated through walls and journeyed to other realities, he sold his successful radio-production and broadcast business and founded the Monroe Institute on a 600-acre spread.

Mr. Monroe has received three patents for processes that use audio signals to help people reach altered states of consciousness. His approach is based on sending complex audio signals that correspond to the brain-wave frequencies associated with different stages of sleep. The idea is to train people, by gradually altering the signals, to attain these brain-wave states even as they remain fully conscious.

Members of the group recently welcomed by the institute's Mr. Mulvey include three pilots, a worker in a plastics factory, a Swiss banker and an accountant from Amsterdam. There is also Jessica Conway, a clairvoyant, who says she shares her London flat with a poltergeist named Josh.

Proof of Afterlife

Several say they would consider an out-of-body experience to be proof of an afterlife. Most haven't left their bodies before. There are envious expressions when Raoul Davila, a San Antonio schoolteacher, says he has had OBEs all his life and only wants to control them better. His are more like auto-body experiences – he says he often induced them by cruising in his '55 Ford coupe.

Their week at the institute is mostly spent prone, in small, dark chambers. There, they listen to tapes that start with the relaxing sound of pounding surf; then, as Mr. Monroe's cadenced voice gives occasional directions, a gentle windlike rushing masks the complex electronic signals meant to alter brain-wave states.

By week's end, about 10 of the 25 report having had OBEs. Jean-Paul Lemaire, a Belgian physical therapist, says he traveled to another plane, where he had tea with a pleasant, grandmotherly lady. Several women say they bumped into each other out-of-body in the institute corridors.

Others aren't sure. "I know I'm having this experience," says Denise Kasell. "Then an hour later I'm saying, 'Nah, that didn't really happen.' "

Mr. Monroe's answer: "It all comes down to an acceptance of something you can't measure in a conventional way."

Puffing pensively on a cigarette, the 79-year-old founder says he doesn't travel out-of-body anymore. The last time he did so was just after the death two years ago of his wife of 23 years, Nancy Penn Monroe. Having visited her, he says, he found that being with her, free from physical trappings, "was so emotionally explosive I couldn't handle it."

Had he gone again, he says, "I wouldn't have been able to come back."

1994 reprinted with permission